

Mission Centered Board Leadership

Board Leadership Strategies to Prevent “Mission Drift”

Mark R. Fisher

Like a small craft dwarfed by tumultuous waves, an organization can get caught in the stormy waters of a crisis and stray off course.

Most often, this organizational drift occurs at the onset of a financial crisis, although drift might even begin before the crisis occurs. The organization makes necessary adjustments, and establishes a new corporate culture that primarily revolves around the financial management of the bottom line.

As the organization focuses more time on fiscal matters, it unintentionally drifts from issues related to fulfillment of its mission and purpose, directing its energy toward an economic model meant to sustain the agency. Plans, recruitment strategies, and conversations begin to concentrate more on money than mission. The memory of why the organization exists is taken for granted and gradually fades—unless the organization decides to right its course.

In Focus

Mission drift can be tied directly to how we go about recruiting board members and raising money. Leaders recruiting a new board member, excited about the individual’s wealth and contacts, may not even discuss the prospect’s enthusiasm for the organization and the people it serves.

The irony is that the celebration of mission is the organizations greatest hope for moving out of a financial crisis. It is mission, and the prospect of fulfillment, that generates charitable support.

Stages of Compassion

A few years ago, I studied the board of directors for a Christian ministry serving adults with disabilities and examined the level of compassion (love for the people served) as a critical factor in determining mission—centered thought. Participants graded their level of concern for clients using a tool called the “Four Stages of Compassion,” adapted from the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Stage one (pity): We see other’s needs and feel discomfort about their condition. We are not thinking so much about self as we are about others. This is the beginning of either a movement to do something—or a decision to stay in place, recognizing need but rationalizing inaction.

Stage two (moved to help): After we identify a person in need, we begin to move in the direction of the individual. The movement might be physical or emotional. In stage two, we are not running away from the individual in need or dismissing an apparent condition.

Stage three (being there): In this stage, we become present in the life of the needy or find that the individual is more significantly in our thoughts and prayers. In addition, we become more knowledgeable about the life of the person. We almost “give birth” to the individual in our thoughts and begin to value the person more fully and are willing to take certain risks on his or her behalf.

Stage four (mercy): We provide unearned help to the individual through voluntary efforts or charitable giving. We begin to invest significant levels of time, thought and possibly financial support. The stage four experience becomes a very personal form of sacrificial giving.

Through my research, I learned that the more compassion a board member has for the people an agency serves, the more willing he or she is to take certain risks toward the fulfillment of mission.

Moving Toward Mission

By no means should board members abandon good business sense in favor of compassionate service. It is incumbent upon each board member to apply his or her best business acumen to the fiscal management of the organization. But prudent board leadership decisions can and should include an understanding and genuine care for the people served.

Lower levels of compassion are often a reflection of a recruitment process that does not substantially test for the prospective board member’s love, or passion for the people an agency serves. The view that the board members primary purpose is to provide a very specific function, rather than become a member of community, also often contributes to lower levels of compassion.

There is little doubt that leaders of organizations can foster greater levels of compassion than you might imagine. A few years ago I was serving an agency that was planning a substantial expansion of services to the

homeless. One of the board members was very challenged by the plan for growth. He was a retired banker, deeply gifted in financial analysis and focused on the various dimensions of managing risk.

This board member was a critical voice and vote in moving forward with the project. No matter how much we tried to explain the program and plans, he just couldn't support the project. He wanted guarantees that everything would work as stated.

Finally, I said, "Bob, I've been studying the issue of "mission drift" and have put together a basic benchmark process called the Four Stages of Compassion. It is a way to help a board member understand the extent to which he or she is identifying with the mission of an organization and the people it serves."

Bob listened to my explanation. "I know exactly what my problem is," he told me. "I'm stuck at stage two."

Together, we determined that the best way to move forward would be for him to spend time with the people who would ultimately be served, as well as talk with some staff members. A few months later, he was able to understand the vision and find a level of comfort and support for the idea of moving forward. He more closely identified with the people who were served and modified his understanding of risk.

A Future Path

Because each board member's level of compassion for the people an agency serves is a critical factor in preventing "mission drift," we must ask ourselves, "How do we facilitate the growth of compassion within the board?" Consider the following:

- Establish a plan to give board members and candidates an opportunity to visit with some of the people your organization serves.
- Position the Four Stages of Compassion as an assessment tool for board members and potential candidates.
- Create a process that confirms the board member's commitment to the mission of your organization and the people it serves.
- Develop agendas for board meetings that allow significant time for discussing issues of mission and those who receive care.

Stormy times cannot be completely avoided, but as our primary emphasis on mission keeps us on course, our passion for the people we serve will begin to transform our communities with real hope.

About Mark R. Fisher

Mark is dedicated to helping a variety of organizations answer the question, "How do we build a community of compassion?"

The focus of his practice has come from a lifelong experience of working with volunteers, donors and staff. He began to realize that the similarities between each of the participants of an organization were more significant than the differences. "By building unity between volunteers, donors, staff and care receivers our ability to achieve full potential increases."

His counsel has helped raised nearly \$750,000,000 in private support and generated thousands of stories in the media. Mark earned his doctorate from the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, Michigan with a dissertation entitled, "Compassion in Board Decision Making." He has been a guest speaker and presenter at numerous conferences and has served on a variety of non-profit boards. He is the author of *Mission Centered Board Leadership* which can be purchased on his web-site, www.markfisher.com.

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